

COLUMBUS, IN - U.S. Congressman Mike Pence was in Columbus on Friday, marking the one year anniversary of the flooding that took place in East Central Indiana. Below is an essay the Congressman penned upon visiting his hometown to assess the damage last year:



Going Home: The Great Flood of 2008

Serving in Washington is about never being where your heart is, and that is especially true in times of tragedy at home.

Arriving home after a week of urging federal assistance for families struggling to recover from the torrential flooding of June 2008 was an anxious experience. I represent 19 counties, but Columbus is home. I didn't know what it would be like to see so many of the sights of my youth laid waste and I was right. It was heartbreaking to see street after street of homes despoiled by the waters of June 7th and to see the brave but weary faces of family and friends struggling to

find the energy and the courage to press on.

I arrived late Thursday, the day after we learned that President Bush would extend personal assistance to families in Bartholomew County. The cop who lives next door and a boyhood friend joined me for an unscheduled look around town. We were met by the tough and cheerful mayor of my hometown, Fred Armstrong. Mayor Armstrong is a Vietnam veteran, whose non-partisan neighborly leadership has made him a local institution. But I suspect it was his time in combat that steeled him for these days and the entire community has benefited from his calm and professionalism.

Riding with the mayor, we headed into the neighborhoods. It was worse than you could imagine. House upon house, street upon street, family upon family had every worldly possession caked with mud and piled in a heap in the front yard. We stopped and approached one family after another and heard the same terrifying story.

Within 15 minutes of water bubbling up from the sewers or appearing in the streets, basements were completely filled to the ceiling and homes were ruined with up to three feet of water on the main floor. Columbus saw three lives lost in the torrent but all agree it would have been much worse had the flood waters risen in the middle of the night. There was simply no time.

We made our way to the home of a 19-year veteran police officer whose large backyard was now filled with small piles of cherished possessions, lovingly placed there by the entire Columbus East football team. As I stood speaking to a weary half dozen volunteers, I looked down at a mud-covered glass case filled with badges and mementos from years of brave service to this community. The officer and his wife told us how they had been overwhelmed by the kindness of neighbors. This tough veteran of many years on the force restrained emotion as he said, "people just started showing up."

We got back in the squad car and headed to Everroad Park West, the modest neighborhood where I grew up. I have taken my children by our old house at 2744 31st Street several times. It is the first home my parents ever owned and it is the backdrop to every memory of my boyhood. The red bricks and black shutters of this small home, the cornfield in the backyard, the woods by Haw Creek, the dead end and dirt-clod fights are all lost in the ether of youth but always with me.

As we pulled into the neighborhood, it was worse than I imagined. Every single home on the way back to 31st Street was ruined. Like Candlelight Village trailer park and elsewhere, it seemed like the storm reserved its worst for good people just starting the American dream.

Turning onto 31st Street, I strained to see my old house and was relieved to see those old red bricks and black shutters still standing tall. I bounded from the car and introduced myself to the kind but weary owner of my old home. She and her mother had been wearing themselves out carrying despoiled possessions from the house but she seemed remarkably unbowed. Smiling she asked, "You want to go in?"

We moved away from Everroad Park West when I was about 12 in 1972 and I had never been back since. Walking into the house was like walking into a dream and a nightmare. The walls and the picture window of the living room were the same. But for the collapsing furniture and mud stains, I was home. And my heart was breaking.

I walked into the kitchen where my mother watched us out the back window while she made dinner. I saw that view of the cornfield. I walked into my parents' bedroom where we would pile on the bed to watch the Wizard of Oz once a year. After that I walked into my old bedroom.

This was not the homecoming I had hoped to enjoy someday but I believe it was the homecoming I needed to see this day. You see, my present home on the north side of town was missed by the floodwaters by about 20 feet.

As I walked out of 2744 31st Street, I felt that it was important for me to be in my old house to better understand what nearly 2,000 Columbus families are dealing with. The pictures and the financial loss don't explain the hardship that families are facing after the Great Flood of 2008. When the debris is cleared and the federal assistance is disbursed the heartbreak will still remain. Losing the place of memories is second only to losing those those you made them with.

Over the next five days I was in Indiana my experience at 2744 31st Street would be repeated again and again. Homes ruined, possessions destroyed but families standing tall, surrounded by neighbors sharing the work and looking to the future. Heroes all.

Here in this small Indiana city, as the Old Book says, the rain came down, the flood waters rose, the wind blew and beat against these houses but they did not fall because 2744 31st Street, like all of Columbus, like all of Indiana, is built on a foundation of faith and compassion and generosity that no storm can ever defeat.

I will continue to work to help these families recover. I urge you to do likewise. Find a way to come alongside with either resources or time because there are long days of recovery ahead for many Indiana cities and towns. And remember to pray that the Lord "be close to the brokenhearted." If we will all do our part, if we will continue to give and work and pray, I know that all the 2744's will again be the place where memories abide and the place where hope is born; they will again be home.

Mike Pence
Columbus, Indiana
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